

# Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The work of this committee was initiated by a request from Senator John O. Pastore to Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Robert H. Finch in which Senator Pastore said:

I am exceedingly troubled by the lack of any definitive information which would help resolve the question of whether there is a causal connection between televised crime and violence and antisocial behavior by individuals, especially children. . . . I am respectfully requesting that you direct the Surgeon General to appoint a committee comprised of distinguished men and women from whatever professions and disciplines deemed appropriate to devise techniques and to conduct a study under his supervision using those techniques which will establish scientifically insofar as possible what harmful effects, if any, these programs have on children.

The question raised by this request has been this committee's central concern. However, the research program that was undertaken has attempted to place this question within a larger context. For this reason, the committee's title deliberately emphasizes more than the issue of televised violence and aggressiveness and more than the question of television's harmful effects during childhood and youth.

At the same time the committee was explicitly enjoined from drawing policy conclusions. Our task has been to state the present scientific knowledge about the effects of entertainment television on children's behavior, in the hope that this knowledge may be of use to both citizens and officials concerned with policy.

The findings we will summarize represent the issues and questions treated in the body of the report. They derive primarily from the research conducted under this program but take account also of past research and other current research.

## THE TELEVISION EXPERIENCE

It would be difficult to overstate the pervasiveness of television in the United States. Census data indicate that 96 percent of American homes

have one or more television sets. The average home set is on more than six hours a day. Most adults report watching at least two hours daily. Most children also watch at least two hours daily. For most people, whatever their age, television viewing is a daily experience. Although not everyone watches every day, many watch for much longer than two hours.

Television viewing stands in sharp contrast to the theater, movies, and other entertainment presented outside the home in that it does not usually involve such exclusive or focused attention. Viewers of all ages regularly engage in a wide range of activities while the set is on.

The extent to which this discontinuity of attention alters what would be perceived and understood from television were attention undivided is a moot question. Young children before the age of six usually cannot successfully divide their attention. As a result, what they get from television is probably generally restricted to what is taken in while viewing with full attention and is perceived bereft of a larger context. As the child grows older, he becomes more able to follow at least the rough continuity of what is taking place on television while he is simultaneously doing other things.

The casual acceptance of viewing, however, does not equal indifference to television. By the first grade, a majority of boys and girls exhibit individual taste in program selection and preference for characters. Among younger children, situation comedies and cartoons are most popular. Sixth graders like family situation comedies and adventure programs. Tenth graders prefer adventure programs and music and variety programs. Children and adolescents are attracted to programs featuring characters their own age.

The propensity to view television changes as the individual goes through the major stages of maturation. Frequent viewing usually begins at about age three and remains relatively high until about age 12. Then viewing typically begins to decline, reaching its low point during the teen years. When young people marry and have families, the time they spend viewing tends to increase and then remain stable through the middle adult years. After middle age, when grown children leave home, it rises again.

Many questions about television are presently unanswerable. Three basic ones concern the future character of television, the influences and dynamics involved in the choosing of programs by individual viewers, and the underlying needs served by television that lead to its present extensive use.

It would appear that television, like other media, is progressing through a series of stages from intriguing novelty to accepted commonplace to possible differentiation as a servant of varied tastes. New developments—UHF, public television, cable, cassettes, portable minisets—suggest that in the future the programming available may become increasingly varied and that the mass audience may become a diversity of

smaller segments, each with its special interests. Newspapers, magazines, and radio provide examples of similar evolution.

Why people choose to view what they do, and why they view so much, remain open questions after 20 years of commercial broadcasting. From the various rating services it is easy to determine what audiences choose to view from among what is offered. The process by which choices are made, and the basic appeal that leads to persistent viewing at all ages, remain obscure.

## VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION

Studies of media content show that violence is and has been a prominent component of all mass media in the United States. Television is no exception, and there can be no doubt that violence figures prominently in television entertainment. People are probably exposed to violence by television entertainment more than they are exposed by other media because they use television so much more.

In regard to dramatic entertainment on television, and with violence defined as "the overt expression of physical force against others or self, or the compelling of action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed," an extensive analysis of content has found that:

—The general prevalence of violence did not change markedly between 1967 and 1969. The rate of violent episodes remained constant at about eight per hour.

—The nature of violence did change. Fatalities declined, and the proportion of leading characters engaged in violence or killing declined. The former dropped from 73 to 64 percent; the latter, from 19 to five percent. The consequence is that as many violent incidents occurred in 1969 as in 1967, but a smaller proportion of characters were involved, and the violence was far less lethal.

—Violence increased from 1967 to 1969 in cartoons and in comedies, a category that included cartoons.

—Cartoons were the most violent type of program in these years.

Another study concluded that in 1971 Saturday morning programming, which includes both cartoons and material prepared for adults, approximately three out of ten dramatic segments were "saturated" with violence and that 71 percent involved at least one instance of human violence with or without the use of weapons.

There is also evidence that years high in violence also tend to be years high in overall ratings, and that the frequency of violent programs in a year is related to the popularity of this type of program the previous year. This suggests that televised violence fluctuates partly as a function of the efforts of commercial broadcasters to present what will be maximally popular.

## TELEVISION'S EFFECTS

Television's popularity raises important questions about its social effects. There is interest and concern in regard to many segments of the population—ethnic minorities, religious groups, the old, the unwell, the poor. This committee has been principally concerned with one segment, children and youth, and in particular with the effects of televised violence on their tendencies toward aggressive behavior.

People ask behavioral scientists various questions about television and violence. In our opinion the questions are often far too narrowly drawn. For example:

(1) It is sometimes asked if watching violent fare on television *can* cause a young person to act aggressively. The answer is that, of course, under some circumstances it can. We did not need massive research to know that at least an occasional unstable individual might get sufficiently worked up by some show to act in an impetuous way. The question is faulty, for the real issue is how often it happens, what predispositional conditions have to be there, and what different undesirable, as well as benign, forms the aggressive reaction takes when it occurs.

(2) It is sometimes asked if the fact that children watch a steady fare of violent material on television many hours a day from early childhood through adolescence causes our society to be more violent. Presumably the answer is, to some degree, "yes," but we consider the question misleading. We know that children imitate and learn from everything they see—parents, fellow children, schools, the media; it would be extraordinary, indeed, if they did not imitate and learn from what they see on television. We have some limited data that conform to our presumption. We have noted in the studies at hand a modest association between viewing of violence and aggression among at least some children, and we have noted some data which are consonant with the interpretation that violence viewing produces the aggression; this evidence is not conclusive, however, and some of the data are also consonant with other interpretations.

Yet, as we have said, the real issue is once again quantitative: how much contribution to the violence of our society is made by extensive violent television viewing by our youth? The evidence (or more accurately, the difficulty of finding evidence) suggests that the effect is small compared with many other possible causes, such as parental attitudes or knowledge of and experience with the real violence of our society.

The sheer amount of television violence may be unimportant compared with such subtle matters as what the medium says about it: is it approved or disapproved, committed by sympathetic or unsympathetic characters, shown to be effective or not, punished or unpunished? Social science today cannot say which aspects of the portrayal of violence make a major difference or in what way. It is entirely possible that some

types of extensive portrayals of violence could reduce the propensity to violence in society and that some types might increase it. In our present state of knowledge, we are not able to specify what kinds of violence portrayal will have what net result on society.

What are the alternatives? If broadcasters simply changed the quantitative balance between violent and other kinds of shows, it is not clear what the net effect would be. People hunt and choose the kinds of stimulus material they want. Violent material is popular. If our society changed in no other way than changing the balance of television offerings, people, to some degree, would still seek out violent material. How much effect a modest quantitative change in television schedules would have is now quite unanswerable. More drastic changes, such as general censorship, would clearly have wide effects, but of many kinds, and some of them distinctly undesirable.

In our judgment, the key question that we should be asked is thus a complicated one concerning alternatives. The proper question is, "What kinds of changes, if any, in television content and practices could have a significant net effect in reducing the propensity to undesirable aggression among the audience, and what other effects, desirable and undesirable, would each such change have?"

The state of our knowledge, unfortunately, is not such as to permit confident conclusions in answer to such a question. The readers of this report will find in it evidence relevant to answering such questions, but far short of an answer. The state of present knowledge does not permit an agreed answer.

## EFFECTS ON AGGRESSIVENESS

Television is only one of the many factors which in time may precede aggressive behavior. It is exceedingly difficult to disentangle from other elements of an individual's life history.

Violence and aggressiveness are also not concepts on which there is unvarying consensus. This applies equally to events observed in real life or through the media and to behavior in which an individual may engage. Violence is a vague term. What seems violent to one may not seem so to another. Aggressiveness is similarly ambiguous, and its designation as antisocial depends not only on the act but also on the circumstances and the participants.

For scientific investigation, terms must be defined precisely and unambiguously. Although various investigators have used somewhat different definitions, generally both televised violence and individual aggressiveness have been defined as involving the inflicting of harm, injury, or discomfort on persons, or of damage to property. The translation of such a conception into measurement procedures has varied very

widely, and whether antisocial activity is involved or implied is a matter for judgment in the specific instance.

## Effects on aggressiveness: evidence from experiments

Experiments have the advantage of allowing causal inference because various influences can be controlled so that the effects, if any, of one or more variables can be assessed. To varying degrees, depending on design and procedures, they have the disadvantages of artificiality and constricted time span. The generalizability of results to everyday life is a question often not easily resolvable.

Experiments concerned with the effects of violence or aggressiveness portrayed on film or television have focused principally on two different kinds of effects: *imitation* and *instigation*. Imitation occurs when what is seen is mimicked or copied. Instigation occurs when what is seen is followed by increased aggressiveness.

*Imitation.* One way in which a child may learn a new behavior is through observation and imitation. Some 20 published experiments document that children are capable of imitating filmed aggression shown on a movie or television screen. Capacity to imitate, however, does not imply performance. Whether or not what is observed actually will be imitated depends on a variety of situational and personal factors.

No research in this program was concerned with imitation, because the fact that aggressive or violent behavior presented on film or television can be imitated by children is already thoroughly documented.

*Instigation.* Some 30 published experiments have been widely interpreted as indicating that the viewing of violence on film or television by children or adults increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior. This interpretation has also been widely challenged, principally on the ground that results cannot be generalized beyond the experimental situation. Critics hold that in the experimental situation socially inhibiting factors, such as the influence of social norms and the risk of disapproval or retaliation, are absent, and that the behavior after viewing, though labeled "aggressive," is so unlike what is generally understood by the term as to raise serious questions about the applicability of these laboratory findings to real-life behavior.

The research conducted in this program attempted to provide more precise and extensive evidence on the capacity of televised violence to instigate aggressive behavior in children. The studies variously involve whole television programs, rather than brief excerpts; the possibility of making constructive or helping, as well as aggressive, responses after viewing; and the measurement of effects in the real-life environment of a nursery school. Taken as a group, they represent an effort to take into

account more of the circumstances that pertain in real life, and for that reason they have considerable cogency.

*In sum.* The experimental studies bearing on the effects of aggressive television entertainment content on children support certain conclusions. First, violence depicted on television can immediately or shortly thereafter induce mimicking or copying by children. Second, under certain circumstances television violence can instigate an increase in aggressive acts. The accumulated evidence, however, does not warrant the conclusion that televised violence has a uniformly adverse effect nor the conclusion that it has an adverse effect on the majority of children. It cannot even be said that the majority of the children in the various studies we have reviewed showed an increase in aggressive behavior in response to the violent fare to which they were exposed. The evidence does indicate that televised violence may lead to increased aggressive behavior in certain subgroups of children, who might constitute a small portion or a substantial proportion of the total population of young television viewers. We cannot estimate the size of the fraction, however, since the available evidence does not come from cross-section samples of the entire American population of children.

The experimental studies we have reviewed tell us something about the characteristics of those children who are most likely to display an increase in aggressive behavior after exposure to televised violence. There is evidence that among young children (ages four to six) those most responsive to television violence are those who are highly aggressive to start with—who are prone to engage in spontaneous aggressive actions against their playmates and, in the case of boys, who display pleasure in viewing violence being inflicted upon others. The very young have difficulty comprehending the contextual setting in which violent acts are depicted and do not grasp the meaning of cues or labels concerning the make-believe character of violence episodes in fictional programs. For older children, one study has found that labeling violence on a television program as make-believe rather than as real reduces the incidence of induced aggressive behavior. Contextual cues to the motivation of the aggressor and to the consequences of acts of violence might also modify the impact of televised violence, but evidence on this topic is inconclusive.

Since a considerable number of experimental studies on the effects of televised violence have now been carried out, it seems improbable that the next generation of studies will bring many great surprises, particularly with regard to broad generalizations not supported by the evidence currently at hand. It does not seem worthwhile to continue to carry out studies designed primarily to test the broad generalization that most or all children react to televised violence in a uniform way. The lack of uniformity in the extensive data now at hand is much too impressive to warrant the expectation that better measures of aggression or other methodological refinements will suddenly allow us to see a uniform effect.

## Effects on aggressiveness: survey evidence

A number of surveys have inquired into the violence viewing of young people and their tendencies toward aggressive behavior. Measures of exposure to television violence included time spent viewing, preference for violent programming, and amount of viewing of violent programs. Measures of *aggressive tendencies* variously involved self and others' reports of actual behavior, projected behavior, and attitudes. The behavior involved varied from acts generally regarded as heinous (e.g., arson) to acts which many would applaud (e.g., hitting a man who is attacking a woman).

All of the studies inquired into the relationship between exposure to television violence and aggressive tendencies. Most of the relationships observed were positive, but most were also of low magnitude, ranging from null relationships to correlation coefficients of about .20. A few of the observed correlation coefficients, however, reached .30 or just above.

On the basis of these findings, and taking into account their variety and their inconsistencies, we can tentatively conclude that there is a modest relationship between exposure to television violence and aggressive behavior or tendencies, as the latter are defined in the studies at hand. Two questions which follow are: (1) what is indicated by a correlation coefficient of about .30, and (2) since correlation is not in itself a demonstration of causation, what can be deduced from the data regarding causation?

Correlation coefficients of "middle range," like .30, may result from various sorts of relationships, which in turn may or may not be manifested among the majority of the individuals studied. While the magnitude of such a correlation is not particularly high, it betokens a relationship which merits further inquiry.

Correlation indicates that two variables—in this case violence viewing and aggressive tendencies—are related to each other. It does not indicate which of the two, if either, is the cause and which the effect. In this instance the correlation could manifest any of three causal sequences:

- that violence viewing leads to aggression;
- that aggression leads to violence viewing;
- that both violence viewing and aggression are products of a third condition or set of conditions.

The data from these studies are in various ways consonant with both the first and the third of these interpretations, but do not conclusively support either of the two.

Findings consonant with the interpretation that violence viewing leads to aggression include the fact that two of the correlation coefficients at the .30 level are between *earlier* viewing and *later* measured aggression. However, certain technical questions exist regarding the measures employed, and the findings can be regarded as equally consonant with the



view that both violence viewing and aggression are common products of some antecedent condition or conditions.

Various candidates for such a preceding condition can be identified in the data. These include preexisting levels of aggression, underlying personality factors, and a number of aspects of parental attitudes and behavior, among them parental affection, parental punishment, parental emphasis on nonaggression, and habitual types of parent-child communication patterns. Several of these variables failed to operate statistically in a manner consonant with common origin interpretations. At least two, "parental emphasis on nonaggression" and "family communication patterns," operated in manners consonant with such an interpretation, but the pertinent data were too limited to validate common origin status for either one.

The common origin interpretation remains viable, however. Improved measures might possibly change the picture, and there is need for further and more refined investigation of the role played by personality factors and by family and peer attitudes and behaviors.

## GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

The best predictor of later aggressive tendencies in some studies is the existence of earlier aggressive tendencies, whose origins may lie in family and other environmental influences. Patterns of communication within the family and patterns of punishment of young children seem to relate in ways that are as yet poorly understood both to television viewing and to aggressive behavior. The possible role of mass media in very early acquisition of aggressive tendencies remains unknown. Future research should concentrate on the impact of media material on very young children.

As we have noted, the data, while not wholly consistent or conclusive, do indicate that a modest relationship exists between the viewing of violence and aggressive behavior. The correlational evidence from surveys is amenable to either of two interpretations: that the viewing of violence causes the aggressive behavior, or that both the viewing and the aggression are joint products of some other common source. Several findings of survey studies can be cited to sustain the hypothesis that viewing of violent television has a causal relation to aggressive behavior, though neither individually nor collectively are the findings conclusive. They could also be explained by the operation of a "third variable" related to preexisting conditions.

The experimental studies provide some additional evidence bearing on this issue. Those studies contain indications that, under certain limited conditions, television viewing may lead to an increase in aggressive behavior. The evidence is clearest in highly controlled laboratory studies and considerably weaker in studies conducted under more natural

conditions. Although some questions have been raised as to whether the behavior observed in the laboratory studies can be called "aggressive" in the consensual sense of the term, the studies point to two mechanisms by which children might be led from watching television to aggressive behavior: the mechanism of imitation, which is well established as part of the behavioral repertoire of children in general; and the mechanism of incitement, which may apply only to those children who are predisposed to be susceptible to this influence. There is some evidence that incitement may follow nonviolent as well as violent materials, and that this incitement may lead to either prosocial or aggressive behavior, as determined by the opportunities offered in the experiment. However, the fact that some children behave more aggressively in experiments after seeing violent films is well established.

The experimental evidence does not suffer from the ambiguities that characterize the correlational data with regard to third variables, since children in the experiments are assigned in ways that attempt to control such variables. The experimental findings are weak in various other ways and not wholly consistent from one study to another. Nevertheless, they provide suggestive evidence in favor of the interpretation that viewing violence on television is conducive to an increase in aggressive behavior, although it must be emphasized that the causal sequence is very likely applicable only to some children who are predisposed in this direction.

Thus, there is a convergence of the fairly substantial experimental evidence for *short-run* causation of aggression among some children by viewing violence on the screen and the much less certain evidence from field studies that extensive violence viewing precedes some *long-run* manifestations of aggressive behavior. This convergence of the two types of evidence constitutes some preliminary indication of a causal relationship, but a good deal of research remains to be done before one can have confidence in these conclusions.

The field studies and the laboratory studies converge also on a number of further points.

First, there is evidence that any sequence by which viewing television violence causes aggressive behavior is most likely applicable only to some children who are predisposed in that direction. While imitative behavior is shown by most children in experiments on that mechanism of behavior, the mechanism of being incited to aggressive behavior by seeing violent films shows up in the behavior only of some children who were found in several experimental studies to be previously high in aggression. Likewise, the correlations found in the field studies between extensive viewing of violent material and acting in aggressive ways seem generally to depend on the behavior of a small proportion of the respondents who were identified in some studies as previously high in aggression.

Second, there are suggestions in both sets of studies that the way children respond to violent film material is affected by the context in which it is presented. Such elements as parental explanations, the favorable or unfavorable outcome of the violence, and whether it is seen as fantasy or reality may make a difference. Generalizations about all violent content are likely to be misleading.

Thus, the two sets of findings converge in three respects: a preliminary and tentative indication of a causal relation between viewing violence on television and aggressive behavior; an indication that any such causal relation operates only on some children (who are predisposed to be aggressive); and an indication that it operates only in some environmental contexts. Such tentative and limited conclusions are not very satisfying. They represent substantially more knowledge than we had two years ago, but they leave many questions unanswered.

Some of the areas on which future research should concentrate include: (1) Television's effects in the context of the effects of other mass media. (2) The effects of mass media in the context of individual developmental history and the totality of environmental influences, particularly that of the home environment. In regard to the relationship between televised violence and aggression, specific topics in need of further attention include: predispositional characteristics of individuals; age differences; effects of labeling, contextual cues, and other program factors; and longitudinal influences of television. (3) The functional and dysfunctional aspects of aggressive behavior in successfully adapting to life's demands. (4) The modeling and imitation of prosocial behavior. (5) The role of environmental factors, including the mass media, in the teaching and learning of values about violence, and the effects of such learning. (6) The symbolic meanings of violent content in mass media fiction, and the function in our social life of such content.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Previous scientific efforts to assess evidence of television's effects on youthful viewers have come to a variety of conclusions. Much testimony has been collected to support the various positions, and opinions have been strongly expressed.

At the time the work of this committee began in 1969, the most widely accepted summary evaluation of the research findings was probably that which emerged from a well-known 1961 study:

*For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial (Schramm, Lyle, and Parker, 1961).*

Nevertheless, some scientific studies were finding more controversial evidence. A small body of research had concluded that "witnessing aggressive TV programs serves to reduce or control the acting out of aggressive tendencies rather than to facilitate or stimulate aggression" (Feshbach, 1969).

Other investigators had concluded that "the observation of aggression is more likely to induce hostile behavior than to drain off aggressive inclinations" (Berkowitz, 1964).

Against this backdrop of conflicting expert opinion, the committee began its work.

### HISTORY OF THE COMMITTEE

The work of this committee was initiated by a request from Senator John O. Pastore, Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Communica-

tions of the Senate Commerce Committee, in a letter of March 5, 1969, to Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Robert Finch, in which Senator Pastore said:

I am exceedingly troubled by the lack of any definitive information which would help resolve the question of whether there is a causal connection between televised crime and violence and antisocial behavior by individuals, especially children. . . . I am respectfully requesting that you direct the Surgeon General to appoint a committee comprised of distinguished men and women from whatever professions and disciplines deemed appropriate to devise techniques and to conduct a study under his supervision using those techniques which will establish scientifically insofar as possible what harmful effects, if any, these programs have on children.

On March 12, 1969, in a statement to the Communications Subcommittee, Surgeon General William H. Stewart announced that he would appoint

an Advisory Panel of experts in the behavioral sciences, the mental health disciplines, and communications to study the effects of televised violence. Their task will be to review what is presently known, and to design and to recommend the long-range research studies which will help answer the specific questions now under discussion. The Panel members will be knowledgeable about television and violence, and, of equal importance, experts in such related areas as social psychology, communication and learning, and the etiology of emotional disturbance.

Dr. Stewart told the subcommittee that he would direct the National Institute of Mental Health to assume responsibility for the functions of the Advisory Panel and to provide technical staff for the study. On April 16, 1969, HEW Secretary Finch issued a directive authorizing the formation of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. The Secretary said the committee would confine itself solely to scientific findings and make no policy recommendations. Its approach, he said, would be similar to that of the Surgeon General's 1962-63 Committee on Smoking and Health, which limited itself to developing factual data and conclusions about the possible causal relationship between smoking and health.

"As far as this department is concerned," Secretary Finch said, "we have no mandate and no power that relate to commercial broadcasting and we do not seek any, but we do have a clear responsibility in the area of public health including the important field of mental health."

## Selection of members

In selecting the advisory panel, the Surgeon General noted that it would be a scientific group and that its credentials should be recognized by the scientific community, the broadcasting industry, and the general public.

Letters from the Surgeon General went out to a variety of academic and professional associations—including the American Sociological

Association, the American Anthropological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association. In addition, letters went to the National Association of Broadcasters, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC). All these groups were asked to recommend knowledgeable scientists for membership on the Advisory Committee. Other distinguished social scientists, government officials, and members of the broadcasting industry were also asked for nominations.

From the dozens of names proposed by these groups and individuals, a list of 40 was drawn up by the Office of the Surgeon General. This list of "recognized experts in the behavioral sciences and mental health disciplines" was sent by the Surgeon General on April 28, 1969, to the presidents of the National Association of Broadcasters and the three national commercial broadcast networks. Dr. Stewart asked the broadcasters to indicate "which individuals, if any, you believe would *not* be appropriate for an impartial scientific investigation of this nature."

"I am taking this step," the Surgeon General said, "because the studies initiated by this group may involve the active collaboration of the television industry. I want to insure that all members of the advisory committee are acceptable to the major networks and broadcasters."

The National Association of Broadcasters and two of the networks responded by supplying a total of seven names of individuals they thought inappropriate to serve on the committee. From the remaining 33 names, 11 members were chosen. One committee member was not on the original list but was added to strengthen representation in one of the scientific disciplines.

We believe some comment on this manner of selection is in order. Most of us were unaware of the selection procedure at the time the committee was formed and we believe there was a serious error in this process. We agree that nominations should have been sought from academic and professional organizations as well as from broadcasters and other groups with relevant expertise and knowledge. However, we do not agree that any group should have been allowed to cite individuals as unacceptable. Such a procedure in effect shared responsibility for committee appointment. We do not believe such responsibility should be shared. Moreover, we feel that future government advisory committees concerned with matters of public interest should be selected in such a way that no legitimate criticism about the manner of selection can be leveled afterward, either by the public or by the committee itself.

We began our work as a committee on June 16-17, 1969. The general outline of the mode of operation of the committee and its initial activities were summarized in a brief progress report issued in October 1969 (see Appendix A).

## Observations on the general nature of advisory committees

While this is not the place to offer elaborate commentary on the organizational and operational problems of committees and commissions formed to examine complex social problems, some discussion is appropriate. More extended analyses have already been advanced by Lipsky (1971) and Wilson (1971).

If the following elements are present, there will almost certainly be serious controversy: (1) Present the committee with a complex question about which there is both public and scientific controversy. This is almost bound to be the case, or there would be no demand for the committee in the first place. (2) Ask the committee to arrive at unequivocal conclusions. Again, this is a likely circumstance. (3) Announce the committee formation publicly, thus emphasizing its importance and stature. (4) Give the committee a severely limited time period in which to reach its conclusions.

These four circumstances, of course, are almost inevitable attributes of the commission or committee approach to examining current social problems. They are cited, not to make excuses for the work done by such bodies, but rather to point out that these circumstances need to be recognized as another dimension of the difficulty of dealing with substantive problems in this way.

Our committee was not immune to these difficulties. The differences of opinion which have arisen during the life of this committee, about the meaning of scientific data on the issue of television and its relationship to social behavior, have been the sort expected in any complex area of investigation. They reflect the lack of unanimity among scientists working in this area.

Comparing the task of this Advisory Committee with that of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health may be useful. In both instances the Surgeon General convened advisory groups to examine an issue of public health. The original request from Senator Pastore asking for the convening of this group was stimulated "because of the outstanding contribution made by [the Surgeon General's] Committee through its report on smoking and health."

The Committee on Smoking and Health reached its conclusions after a comprehensive reexamination and reevaluation of existing scientific evidence. The present committee, in contrast, has had available new research specifically sponsored to provide it with additional scientific data.

The committee began its work immediately after a comprehensive examination of existing evidence in the area of televised violence had been made by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Indeed, on September 23, 1969 (one day before our second

committee meeting), the National Commission issued its statement on violence in television entertainment programs. That statement, the work it represented, and the reaction it received underscored the original decision to sponsor new research rather than to rely solely on reexamining preexisting material.

## THE RESEARCH PROGRAM

One million dollars was made available for the support of new research, and a secretariat, the Television and Social Behavior Program, was organized within the National Institute of Mental Health to provide staff support for the work of the Advisory Committee.

The committee worked closely with the staff throughout the life of this program. However, a committee composed of individuals with other full-time responsibilities is not able to administer a large scale research program. The staff secretariat took major responsibility for finding competent investigators who were willing to undertake pertinent research within the time constraints. The staff also was responsible for selecting those proposals which seemed most likely to provide significant data and for monitoring the studies until their completion.

## Research strategy

At the outset two alternative research strategies were considered: (a) attempt to develop a single, unified research project, or (b) seek out a series of individual studies which would address a variety of related questions and which would provide an interrelated set of findings. The former did not seem feasible, given the time limits and the present state of the art in this field.

Between August 1969 and April 1970, 40 formal research proposals were submitted and reviewed for possible funding. A system of formal review, similar to that used to evaluate research contracts for the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute of Mental Health, was instituted to select the applications to receive financial support. For the Television and Social Behavior Program, groups of four to seven senior scientists in the researcher's field of expertise met on nine occasions to review proposals. Each review committee consisted largely of social scientists in the field who were not affiliated with the Television and Social Behavior program and senior staff members of the National Institute of Mental Health Intramural and Extramural Programs. In addition, one or two members of the Scientific Advisory Committee, functioning individually as experts, were present at most meetings. The committee as a whole did not select the research projects.



## Research projects

In the end, 23 independent projects were funded which provided a multidimensional approach to the assessment of television's effects. These 23 projects—many of which involved more than one study and sometimes more than one report—and a number of specially commissioned papers form much of the basis for our inferences and conclusions. (For a list of all reports and papers, see Appendix B.)

Although the projects vary widely in subject, scope, and approach, there were similarities among them in many instances, and the program staff and the investigators attempted to link them so that they could provide a coherent set of findings. This was done at both the investigation and interpretation levels and resulted in the review and interpretation as a group of sets of studies with common features, and in the investigators' sharing of ideas, methods, measures, and in one instance, experimental subjects.<sup>1</sup>

The reports and papers were divided into five groups according to their common concerns and their theoretical and empirical orientations.

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<sup>1</sup>In one instance, two research teams (Liebert and Baron, 1971; Ekman et al., 1971) collaborated in an experimental study to conduct very different investigations using the same subjects (children), stimulus materials (violent and nonviolent television), and dependent variable (the choosing of a response that would either allegedly help or hurt an unseen—and actually nonexistent—other child playing a game). Liebert and Baron (1971) studied the relationship between exposure to television violence and a tendency to aggress. Ekman et al. (1971) used subjects' facial expressions as they viewed to study their emotional reactions to violent and nonviolent television content, and related emotional reaction to subsequent aggressive and helping behavior.

In another cooperative endeavor, surveys of adolescents in a Maryland school system were conducted by three research teams (McIntyre and Teevan, 1971; McLeod, Atkin, and Chaffee, 1971a; Ward, 1971) who shared both subjects and data collection resources. In addition, one set of investigators used the Maryland data in conjunction with data on another sample to better test the consistency of results (McLeod et al., 1971a).

To obtain a consistent criterion for assessing the amount of violence viewed by their subjects, many investigators used the violence ratings of television series arrived at by Greenberg and Gordon (1971b) in their study of television critics' and public perceptions of television violence (Baldwin and Lewis, 1971; Fopkes et al., 1971; Friedman and Johnson, 1971; Lefkowitz et al., 1971; LoSciuto, 1971; Lyle and Hoffman, 1971a; McIntyre and Teevan, 1971; McLeod et al., 1971a, 1971b; Robinson and Bachman, 1971). Several investigators made use of Gerbner's extensive content analysis (1971b) for a working definition of violence, and Clark and Blanckenburg (1971) modified this definition for their own purposes and used his data to validate their retrospective content analysis instruments. In a similar manner, Murray (1971) used Bechtel, Achelpohl, and Akers's (1971) tapes of subjects' viewing behavior in their own living rooms as a means of perfecting interobserver reliability. Murray (1971) also used the viewing diary developed by LoSciuto (1971) to measure behavior in regard to television.

Another example of common methods concerns specific questionnaire items. Eight investigators sought to measure television content in relation to violent or deviant behavior by asking subjects to name their four favorite television shows (Bechtel et al., 1971; Chaffee and McLeod, 1971b; Friedman and Johnson, 1971; Lefkowitz et al., 1971; LoSciuto, 1971; McIntyre and Teevan, 1971; Murray, 1971; Robinson and Bachman, 1971), and many used the same wording to query subjects about the amount of time they spent viewing. The data provided by these common measures permitted the testing of patterns derived from the totality of results.

One investigator in each of four groups then attempted to integrate the findings in an "overview" paper (Chaffee, 1971; Greenberg, 1971; Liebert, 1971; Lyle, 1971); an "overview" for the remaining group was prepared by the staff (Comstock, 1971). Each of these papers represents the individual author's perspective. Each of the five published volumes representing the work sponsored by the Television and Social Behavior program is introduced by the appropriate overview paper.

## NATURE OF THE REPORT

The designation of this committee as one concerned with television and social behavior is especially significant. The committee's title emphasizes more than just the issue of violence, and more than the question of the impact of televised violence on the behavior and attitudes of children and adolescents. While the latter remained a central concern, research conducted for this program also studied such topics as the amount of time spent watching television, activities displaced or enhanced by television viewing, television advertising and viewer reactions to it, learning of specific information and role expectations from television, and the comparative effects of black and white and color television on the information learned from a television program. The research program was both strengthened and made more difficult by the effort to place the problem in a larger context; nonetheless we cannot claim that this report or the work of this research program covers the entire subject of television and social behavior.

We are aware of the difficulties of obtaining unequivocal answers to many questions about television's effects on viewers. Television is only one part of a complex web of elements that may influence people's attitudes and behavior. It is difficult to design studies which isolate the effects of television content from these other variables. As a result, generalizing from laboratory experiments, surveys, or short-term studies to the long-term, real-time world can be risky.

## Television and special subgroups

We also believe it important to note that other age groups and segments of the population may be as responsive to the influence of television as are children. For example, elderly people, especially those in homes for the aged, as well as confined or institutionalized individuals for whom television is a major recreational activity and source of information, deserve special consideration in any assessment of the effects of television viewing. But little is known about this at present. Ultimately, of course, the needs and desires of the general viewing public will also have to be included in any attempt at a comprehensive analysis and evaluation of television's influence.

## The vicarious nature of television viewing

Moreover, the vicarious nature of television viewing presents another difficulty in conceptualizing the effects of television. For example, viewing televised violence is very different from being present at a violent encounter. The viewer may identify with the aggressor, but he does not himself deliver any blows or fire any weapons. He may identify with the victim, but he does not himself experience any pain, sustain any wounds, or shed any blood. There is no way he can intervene to prevent or terminate the aggressive exchange, no way he can retaliate against the aggressor, bring the criminal to justice, succor the victim, or comfort the bereaved. His involvement is remote, detached, vicarious, and thus only partial.

The inactivity of the television viewer as a detached onlooker may itself be the essence of the television viewing experience. His detachment may contribute to his own dehumanization. On the other hand, the conscious experiencing of rich and even lurid fantasy without allowing it to spill over into unacceptable real-life behavior is generally acknowledged as characteristic of good mental health.

More than a decade ago, Bauer and Bauer (1960) commented on this issue:

For good or ill, experience via the mass media is predominantly vicarious. Looked at from the long-range point of view of the impact of the media on the population, this fact may in itself have more profound implications (which we cannot anticipate) upon the personality of future generations than the actual content of the communications conveyed by the mass media.

## Changing technology

Equally important is the fact that we are examining television as it is today. Tomorrow's technological innovations will certainly bring changes in the medium and in the way it is used. With increased availability of UHF stations, the growth of cable television, and the development of cassette systems, there will be greatly increased potential for viewer control in selection of programs.

## A CAVEAT AND A REQUEST

The very existence of this Committee is perhaps testimony to a public tendency to expect quick and easy answers to difficult problems and to abdicate responsibility by "delegating" it to institutions rather than making individual decisions. Some people, moreover, seem inclined to be moralistic about the symbolic representation of violence on television and to blame televised violence for what happens in the real world. These tendencies may lead to attributing the phenomenon of violence to

simple and easily correctible factors rather than to the more complex sources in our society. We wish to emphasize, however, that we are not concerned with blame or with making moral judgments. Our concern is with scientific evidence on television's effects.

Throughout our deliberations we have been aware that television is one of the many influences which affect how people grow, learn, and behave toward their environment and toward one another. Our knowledge of the human organism—to say nothing of the social organism—is far from definitive. We have attempted to take a small step toward greater understanding of the medium of television and the implications it may have for society.

We must urge that, in addition to this formal report to the Surgeon General, the serious student of television's effects examine the reports and papers on which we have drawn. They are being published concurrently with this report to permit social scientists and others concerned with the issues involved to evaluate independently the work supported by the Television and Social Behavior Program and the validity of the conclusions reached by this committee. This committee can do no more than offer our own interpretation and evaluation of the findings.

## Chapter 2

# Violence in Society and in the Television Medium

Individual children differ in the readiness with which they can learn to be aggressive or nonaggressive; genetic and other biological factors play a role in these differences (Berkowitz, 1962; Feshbach, 1970). Most small children are capable of learning to be aggressive and nonaggressive, cooperative and rebellious, trustful and suspicious, accommodating and initiating, selfish and sharing, and constructive and destructive to varying degrees. Reinforcing and inhibiting life experiences determine which patterns are more prominently developed. The frequency and intensity of activation, associated rewards or punishment, prevailing values, and available role models influence the character of these patterns.

### TELEVISION AND PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

In infancy, neurophysiological patterns are immature, and behavioral responses are immediate, direct, generalized, and apt to be "all or none" in character, with considerable potential for change and reversal of response. In the course of early childhood development, the maturation of central nervous system tissues and the patterning of tissue function by experience make available a wide range of direct and indirect, generalized and localized, complete and partial, immediate and delayed responses. Some patterns of response are reinforced and some are inhibited. Patterns which are reinforced at one time may be inhibited at

another. In the course of training, education, and acculturation, patterns of varying intensity and complexity are developed and associated with one another, so that particular behavioral responses and roles are manifest in interactions with other persons.

Most children over ten years of age show varying degrees of shame, guilt, and inhibition associated with crying, sucking, messiness, hitting, and other behaviors which they freely and comfortably displayed in early childhood. A stimulus which reinforces a response in early childhood may inhibit the same response in later childhood when inhibitory mechanisms are more highly developed. A specific response which has been learned may be employed at one time for constructive purposes and at another time for destructive purposes. The act of hitting which initiates an assault may at other times be employed for protection or for prevention of injustice.

The physical, intellectual, and emotional resources of adolescents; their motivation toward independence from their families, toward autonomy and development of personal identity; and their proclivities for forming groups often render them capable of successful aggressive, anti-authority behavior for the first time. While most of this behavior represents a phase in development and in this respect is prosocial in nature, it is often disquieting and disrupting to parents and other authorities who are challenged. When these interactions are poorly handled by any of the parties involved, antisocial behavior may be one result. The precise impact televised content might have at particular points in the maturation process has yet to be determined.

The complexities of developmental processes in childhood and adolescence and the variations from one individual to another make it difficult to predict the effects of any single carefully controlled stimulus upon behavior and impossible to predict fully the effects of the wide variety of visual and auditory stimuli offered in television programs. We need much more information in order to delineate the effects of televised violence upon the behavior and development of children. To obtain it, it would be necessary to conduct both short-term and longitudinal research in controlled laboratory situations and in naturalistic settings; with young people at various stages of development, of differing character, from differing cultures, in varying emotional states; using a variety of stimuli arranged in varying sequences and with variable complexity.

Many speculations are possible, but hypotheses have been tested only for very few circumstances and ages; these cannot be validly generalized to apply to ages, states, and situations different from those which were investigated.

### TELEVISION AND SOCIALIZATION

The socialization process is also a complex one. For a child discovering his inner and outer world and learning to respond to each, television

may be an important source of models which demonstrate when, why, and how aggression can be appropriate.

Each individual lives in a comparatively circumscribed context. Communication media offer opportunities for contact with a broader spectrum of experiences. Television, with its visual and auditory impact, is capable of providing vicarious experience with lifestyles and values from many different social contexts. It also provides a setting in which a young person might learn the strategies, tactics, and techniques of aggression.

However, whether he puts to use what he learns and behaves aggressively will not depend only on what he sees or does not see on television. Nor will it depend only on what he sees or does not see in any other discrete experience in his own life. Although the causal antecedents of aggressive behavior are not fully understood, it is certain that they are diverse, numerous, and complex in their relationship to each other and to aggressiveness.

The impact of television viewing can only be fully understood when we know something about a young person's own nature, his family, his neighborhood, his school, and other major circumstances and influences in his life. The strongly emotional experiences that occur in a child's relations with other members of the family and with peers are especially important. This is not to deny the potential importance of television. Rather, it is to say that other factors are also potentially important. These elements invariably contribute a context which influences the effects television has on the viewer.

The family, the church, the legal system, and the military, among other institutions, communicate codes, ethics, and guidelines for aggression and violence. The extent to which television reinforces or weakens these codes or guidelines is not presently known.

Commercial television in the United States has not primarily attempted to be a teaching agent: its self-chosen primary role has been to entertain. Entertainment, however—whether via television or not—may unobtrusively convey ideas, information, sentiments, and values to the members of a society. Enculturating factors and his developing conscience provide criteria that may help a young person to clarify which values and behaviors, presented in entertainment, are to be emulated in reality and which are to be kept in the realm of fantasy.

## DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN REALITY AND FANTASY

Each person in the television audience is exposed to a broad variety of stimuli. These stimuli constitute a complex continuum ranging from what was conceived of as fantasy to mediated views of reality. Each person in the audience perceives and further interprets the stimuli through his own patterns of ideas, values, and responses.